

# Integrating Collocation Instruction into the Indian School Curriculum: A Pedagogical Imperative

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*Despite the centrality of vocabulary in second language acquisition, collocational competence—the ability to use natural word combinations—has received limited attention in Indian school curricula. This paper argues for a systematic integration of collocation instruction into the English language curriculum, emphasizing its role in communicative competence, fluency, and idiomaticity. Drawing on corpus linguistics, lexical approach theories, and comparative curriculum analysis, this conceptual paper highlights the pedagogical and curricular gaps in the Indian context. It proposes an instructional framework informed by lexical awareness and contextualized language use, aiming to align Indian pedagogical practice with global standards of vocabulary instruction. The discussion underscores the urgent need to embed collocation-based teaching into teacher training, syllabus design, and classroom assessment practices to enhance linguistic authenticity and learner proficiency.*

**Keywords:** Collocation, Lexical Approach, Indian Curriculum, English Language Teaching, Vocabulary Instruction

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## I. Introduction

The acquisition of vocabulary has long been recognized as a cornerstone of second language proficiency. However, in Indian schools, vocabulary teaching has largely emphasized the memorization of isolated lexical items, often neglecting the patterned, phraseological nature of real language use (Nation, 2013). The concept of collocation—the habitual co-occurrence of words—offers a critical lens for rethinking vocabulary pedagogy. As Lewis (1993) argued through his Lexical Approach, the mastery of collocations rather than individual words is key to fluency and naturalness in communication.

This paper explores the pedagogical imperative of integrating collocation instruction into Indian school curricula. Despite growing awareness among applied linguists about the importance of collocations (Wray, 2002; Nesselhauf, 2005), its explicit inclusion in language education remains limited. The study seeks to position collocational competence as an essential component of English language pedagogy and to propose curricular strategies that reflect this theoretical understanding.

## II. Review of Literature

Research in corpus linguistics and phraseology over the past three decades has revolutionized our understanding of how vocabulary functions in natural language use. Scholars such as Sinclair (1991) and Lewis (1993, 2000) have emphasized that the essence of fluency lies not in individual words but in predictable, recurrent word combinations. Sinclair's notion of the idiom principle contrasts with the traditional open-choice principle, demonstrating that proficient language users rely on prefabricated multi-word units to communicate efficiently and naturally. These findings underscore that vocabulary learning cannot be divorced from its collocational environment. The Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1993) transformed language pedagogy by arguing that language consists of meaningful “chunks” rather than isolated lexical items. Learners who internalize common collocations (e.g., make an effort, take responsibility, strong argument) develop greater automaticity in production and comprehension. Schmitt (2010) consolidates this perspective by linking collocational knowledge to lexical depth, suggesting that learners' ability to use collocations appropriately marks their transition from intermediate to advanced proficiency levels. Empirical evidence supports these theoretical claims. Boers and Lindstromberg (2008) demonstrated that explicit instruction in collocations enhances learners' retention, fluency, and idiomaticity. Similarly, Webb et al. (2013) showed that students exposed to contextualized collocation input—through reading and task-based activities—acquire collocations more efficiently than those who study words in isolation. Furthermore, Durrant and Schmitt (2010) found that explicit awareness-raising and repetition are essential for collocational mastery, challenging the assumption that mere exposure suffices. Despite this strong research base, Indian ELT scholarship has seldom explored collocational competence. Mukherjee (2019) critically reviewed Indian school textbooks and observed that lexical pedagogy remains limited to meaning and spelling, without reference to lexical combinations. Rajan (2021) similarly concluded that curriculum frameworks such as

NCERT and SCERT fail to represent collocations as learning objectives. Consequently, students develop a fragmented understanding of word meaning that does not translate into fluent communication. The literature thus exposes a consistent pedagogical gap. While international ELT contexts increasingly adopt corpus-based tools and collocation dictionaries, Indian schools continue to rely on rote memorization and grammar translation. Addressing this imbalance requires not only curricular reform but also a paradigm shift in teachers' understanding of vocabulary as patterned knowledge rather than discrete lexical storage.

### **Context and Need in Indian Curriculum**

The Indian English education system is governed by national frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020), the National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005, draft 2023), and board-level syllabi such as CBSE and ICSE. While these documents highlight communicative competence, they rarely operationalize it in terms of lexical or collocational competence. The NEP (2020) advocates "competency-based and experiential learning," yet classroom realities remain bound to textual comprehension and grammar tests (NCERT, 2022).

A review of widely used textbooks reveals that most vocabulary exercises focus on synonyms, antonyms, and fill-in-the-blanks—activities that prioritize word recognition over word partnership. For instance, exercises may ask students to "use the word beautiful in a sentence" but seldom to pair it with collocates like beautiful scenery or beautifully crafted. This disconnection produces grammatically correct but lexically awkward language, limiting learners' confidence and fluency.

Furthermore, English teaching in India is deeply examination-oriented. High-stakes assessments emphasize grammar accuracy and reading comprehension, leaving little room for creative or idiomatic use of language. Teachers, under pressure to complete the syllabus, seldom introduce lexical patterning or corpus-informed examples. This systemic neglect has long-term consequences: learners may pass exams but struggle to communicate naturally in higher education and global contexts.

Integrating collocation pedagogy within the Indian curriculum is thus not a luxury but a necessity. The communicative language teaching (CLT) paradigm, already endorsed by NEP (2020), offers an appropriate theoretical foundation for this shift. By emphasizing meaningful input, interaction, and contextual usage, CLT aligns well with the lexical approach. The challenge lies in adapting these global frameworks to Indian classrooms, ensuring that learners receive balanced exposure to both structural and lexical dimensions of language.

## **III. Discussion and Analysis**

Collocation instruction must be viewed not merely as an additive feature of language teaching but as a fundamental shift in pedagogical philosophy. Cognitive and usage-based linguistics (Ellis, 2012; Bybee, 2006) posit that language learning is experience-driven: frequent co-occurrence of words in context leads to mental chunking and faster retrieval. When learners encounter a phrase repeatedly, the phrase becomes a single cognitive unit, reducing processing load and enhancing fluency.

In this view, teaching grammar and vocabulary separately is pedagogically counterproductive. The human brain stores and retrieves language holistically; thus, language instruction must simulate authentic exposure patterns. Classroom activities like corpus-informed concordance analysis, lexical notebooks, and collocation dictionaries can help learners notice recurring word patterns and use them productively (Hunston, 2002). Curricular integration requires systemic planning across three levels: syllabus design, classroom instruction, and assessment.

Syllabus design should specify lexical learning outcomes alongside grammar and skills. For example, instead of stating "students will use adjectives accurately," it should note "students will use frequent adjective–noun collocations (e.g., strong evidence, deep concern)."

Classroom instruction must move beyond rote exercises toward contextualized tasks—dialogues, reading passages, and writing prompts that embed natural collocations. Teachers should encourage noticing through underlining, matching, and gap-fill tasks drawn from authentic corpora like COCA or the British National Corpus.

Assessment should measure not only knowledge of meaning but also learners' ability to use collocations appropriately in speech and writing. Rubrics should include "lexical naturalness" as a criterion for fluency and coherence.

Teacher professional development is central to this reform. Many teachers lack training in lexical analysis and corpus linguistics, which hinders effective classroom application. Pre-service programs should incorporate modules on phraseology and digital tools (e.g., AntConc, Sketch Engine) to build lexical awareness. In-service training can focus on adapting textbook materials and designing collocation-rich lesson plans.

#### IV. Pedagogical Implications

##### **Curricular Design:**

Collocation-based outcomes should be explicitly embedded in the curriculum. Each grade level can include a list of high-frequency collocations relevant to the learners' communicative needs. Curriculum planners must collaborate with linguists to ensure lexical patterns reflect authentic usage, drawing on frequency data from corpus research (Nation, 2013).

##### **Teacher Training:**

Effective integration depends on teacher competence. Teacher education programs should incorporate lexical theory and practice, emphasizing how collocations enhance fluency. Workshops can model classroom activities such as collocation grids, lexical notebooks, and contextualized practice. Teachers should also learn to use learner corpora to identify typical collocational errors (e.g., do a mistake).

##### **Instructional Strategies:**

Practical classroom approaches might include:

Collocation grids: Students identify and group collocates (e.g., make/take/do + noun).

Concordance lines: Using corpus samples to notice real usage patterns.

Contextualized phrase practice: Role-plays, writing tasks, and reading comprehension integrated with lexical noticing.

Data-driven learning (DDL): Students explore authentic language data to deduce collocational patterns independently (Johns, 1991).

##### **Assessment:**

Assessment frameworks should evolve beyond discrete-item tests. Writing and speaking evaluations can include descriptors like "use of natural lexical combinations" and "idiomatic precision." Teachers can use portfolios and reflective journals to monitor students' collocational development over time.

##### **Policy Implication:**

Educational policymakers should ensure that national language frameworks (e.g., NCF 2023) include collocational competence as a measurable skill. Resource materials and teacher guides should provide explicit examples and scaffolding activities aligned with NEP 2020's competency-based model.

#### V. Conclusion

Collocational competence is a decisive indicator of advanced language proficiency. Indian English classrooms must evolve from word-based to phrase-based pedagogy to cultivate authentic communicative ability. Integrating collocation instruction aligns with NEP 2020's focus on skill-based and outcome-oriented education. Policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators must collaborate to institutionalize this shift, ensuring that learners acquire not only grammatical correctness but also lexical naturalness.

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